

So he hit his pal Ellis up for a part-time job at the Burger 'N' Run, taking advantage of the fast-food industry's neo-proclivity toward hiring near destitute, near desperate older folks, since the younger work force was dwindling, and somewhat less enthusiastic about good honest hard work than previous upcoming batches had been.

The night shift, Clete found, was a killer. Around midnight the old eyeballs just didn't want to stay open on his first night on the job, until an adrenaline rush incited by a fist fight between two Marines out in front of the counter pulled Clete away from his table wiping, got his heart to leaping like a cockroach on a hot griddle.

"Clete, you dumb shit, don't ever try to break up a fight like that," Ellis said after he'd dragged his friend away from the fray and parked him in the swivel chair in the office behind the kitchen. Clete had sidled in between the two men as they barked and pushed their chests out in the pre-fight ritual; he'd tried to talk sense, in a calm tone of voice, the voice of wisdom and experience. His wisdom and experience got his hat snatched off his head and stuffed into his mouth, and then got him stuffed head-first into the trash can, out of the way so the fight could take its course.

A crash of glass reverberating through the walls said that one of those combatants had exited the restaurant without using the door; a Doppler-quick siren said a firm form of mediation was on the way.

Clete plucked a french fry out of his ear and said in a trembling voice: "This type of shit happen every night here?" "Something weird," Ellis replied, "goes down every damned night, partner." He pulled a pint of bourbon out of his desk drawer, took a nip off it and handed it to Clete. "I don't know," Clete mused, as the pulse in his carotids pounded, "if I can handle this." Ellis watched his friend drain three inches out of the bottle, then he said, "You got the mortgage taken care of yet?" Clete shook his head, took another shot. "Then I suggest you hang in there, partner, at least until something better comes along."

#### ROLLIN' AND TUMBLIN' BLUES

Ginger got ahold of one of Juanita's high heels and gave it a good chewing. Juanita caught her at it and gave her little dog a good spanking with a loosely rolled newspaper, then she checked out the damage to her shoe. The thin part of the heel an inch off the floor had been gnawed a bit ragged, but it didn't seem to Juanita that the struct-



ural integrity had been undermined. She found out different when she wore the shoes to the Labor Day dance in front of the fountain at the mall ....

She and Clete danced the jitterbug and foxtrot to the music of the jazz quintet and its lady singer who specialized in the tunes of Cole Porter. After a lively 'I Get a Kick Out of You,' that had Juanita doing some high can-can kicks that further weakened an already damaged heel, she and Clete headed for the escalator, enroute to the little Italian restaurant's sidewalk bar.

Clete followed his wife onto the moving metal stairs. When they swooped upward out of their brief horizontal slide, the slight increase in gravity caused by the sudden uplift proved to be the damaged heel's last straw. It shook and vibrated under Juanita, and when she had ridden halfway to the second level it gave way, broke at its weakest point and sent her tumbling backwards, a roll — in the escalator's narrow confines — that collected all the lower altitude riders the way a rolling cartoon snowball collects more snow.

The multi-colored ball burst apart at the bottom of the ride, and bodies scattered like an exercise in entropy, slid and spun like compass needles on the buffed floor. Then a series of random fistfights broke out, with nobody involved in the roll-and-tumble affair being exactly sure who was to blame.

Clete dabbed at a cut on his forehead then grabbed Juanita's hand and led her away from the fray. She limped along with him, and he said, "There must be a place on the bottom floor where we can get a drink."

#### AMBER BLUES

After working out with the Loma Alta Brass Band in a late afternoon blowing session out on Clete Johnson's patio, in a partially successful attempt to move the repertoire into Fats Waller territory, Bob Urp stashed his alto sax in the back seat of his Hyundai and drove down to the sea shore. His agenda was a slow and aimless cruise, to kill time; ever since Glenda's mother had moved in, he had been avoiding his castle regularly ....

He bought a monster can of malt liquor and a pint of bourbon at Bonita Liquor and hit Pacific Street, turned left on that two-lane ribbon of blacktop that rolled out along the bluff top overlooking the city's cobbly beaches. The gulls rode the updrafts that blew up the face of the bluff,